

150
YEARS AGO



“AT ALL TIMES READY”

THE MARINES AT HARPERS FERRY AND THE JOHN BROWN RAID: OCTOBER 1859

Story by GySgt Thomas E. Williams, USMC (Ret) • Photos courtesy of the author

Few people today realize that United States Marines captured John Brown 150 years ago, ending his attempt to incite a revolt in Virginia. Fewer still grasp the military and political intrigue beyond the issues of slavery that surrounded the raid or the challenges that an Army lieutenant colonel named Robert E. Lee and those Marines faced in resolving the issue. Their ability to adapt to the

rapidly changing mission and the courage and discipline that allowed them to defuse a highly explosive situation would directly reflect on operations with which our current Marines are dealing.

On the night of 16 Oct. 1859, the fanatical antislavery guerrilla John Brown of Kansas led a small group of followers in a raid on Harpers Ferry, Va. His goal was to capture the federal arsenal there and

provide the arms for a slave revolt that he anticipated would be inspired by his actions. He and his men had no difficulty seizing their objective from the lone, unarmed night watchman. Brown divided his men into small parties and dispersed them throughout the town and arsenal complex. During the night they would kidnap more than 40 locals as hostages.

The following morning, after spotting



one of Brown's raiders, the townspeople finally were alerted to the situation. Throughout the morning, armed local citizens attacked and scattered the raiders, freeing many of the captives. Casualties and desertions reduced Brown's force to a few men; rumors placed the number in the hundreds.

When militia units from Maryland and Virginia converged on the scene, Brown and five of his remaining men, four unwounded and able to fire a rifle, along with 11 hostages were cornered in the arsenal's fire-station engine house. The fifth raider, Brown's son Oliver, lay mortally wounded.

The federal government in Washington first learned of the insurrection late on



In this previous Harpers Ferry Raid program, GySgt Tom Williams, director of the United States Marine Corps Historical Company, goes over last-minute details (above) of the Harpers Ferry Raid with his interpretative specialists and delivers (left) an overview of the actual capture of John Brown. A similar historical portrayal is planned for the 150th anniversary of the raid.

the morning of 17 Oct. Normally, this would have been considered a local problem, but since the raid involved the federal arsenal, President James Buchanan assigned Secretary of War John B. Floyd to handle the situation. Floyd assigned command of the operation to LTC Robert E. Lee. On leave at his home in Arlington, Va., Lee was the only senior Army officer available. A young Army officer, First Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart, also on leave, delivered the orders to Lee and volunteered to be his aide.

The nearest U.S. Army troops were at Fortress Monroe, two days away. With this in mind, the Secretary of War asked the Navy Department for assistance, bringing in the Marine Corps. Secretary of the Navy Isaac Toucey sent a messenger to Colonel Commandant John Harris at the Marine Barracks, "8th and I" in Washington, D.C., ordering him to send all available Marines to Harpers Ferry.

Drawing from the Marine Barracks and the Marine Detachment, Washington Navy Yard, 1stLt Israel Greene, the officer of the day, mustered all men fit for duty. Six sergeants and 80 other men were armed and at the railroad station for the next train at 3:20 p.m. They took with them two 12-pound Dahlgren boat howitzers.

Col Harris wanted two officers to accompany the Marines, but since no additional line officers were available, he sent the paymaster of the Marine Corps, Major William Russell. Although Russell was a senior officer and more experienced Marine, as a staff officer he could provide only advice and support. By law he could not command troops.

After changing trains outside of Baltimore, the Marines reached Sandy Hook, Md., just across the river from Harpers Ferry, late in the afternoon of 17 Oct. There they waited for Lee and Stuart, who arrived by special train after 10:30 p.m. Lee led his small force across the railroad bridge into the town. He quickly but quietly had the Marines relieve the militiamen guarding the perimeter of the arsenal. Dealing with a difficult situation, and wishing to avoid further bloodshed, especially among the hostages, Lee waited for daylight on the 18th before taking action.

The attack on the arsenal still was considered a local matter, so LTC Lee offered the mission of attacking the firehouse to both states' militias, but their leaders declined. One is reputed to have remarked: "You are paid for doing this kind of work." Rescue of the hostages fell to the Marines.

First Lt Greene eagerly began planning

Gunny Williams takes the audience inside the engine house to describe the actions and intentions of John Brown (with beard), portrayed by Steve Hanson.

the assault. The storming party would consist of Greene and 12 men, with two more Marines armed with sledgehammers to break down the door. Another 12 men would stand ready as a reserve. Lee feared that in the dim light of dawn, identifying friend from foe would be difficult and the chance of hostages being injured by “friendly fire” was too great.

He ordered the Marines to make the assault with muskets unloaded and rely solely on their bayonets. At daylight, Stuart was to deliver a note from Lee to the leader of the guerrilla force, demanding his surrender. If the insurgent refused, Stuart was to wave his hat, signaling the Marines to launch an immediate assault.

At dawn, following a night of light rain, Stuart made his final attempt to obtain peace. They still were unsure who was leading the raiders. Rumors were spreading that it was “Old Osawatomie,” John Brown, of Kansas, although he had been using the name Isaac Smith since taking up residence in the area. When Brown received the note, he attempted to negotiate with Stuart. As ordered, the dragoon officer would have no part of it, made his signal and the Marines rushed forward.

When the sledgehammers proved incapable, Greene ordered his men to grab a nearby ladder. Two blows from the makeshift battering ram caused the door to pivot inward. The lieutenant was the first man through, followed by Maj Russell, carrying only a rattan switch. Behind them the Marines “came rushing in like tigers.”

The first figure Greene encountered was Lewis Washington, one of the hostages and an acquaintance. Washington quickly pointed out Brown. Greene struck with his sword, disabling Brown, but failed to kill him when his sword bent on a second blow. The Marines bayoneted two other insurrectionists, but not before two of their own were shot. Private Luke Quinn, while attempting to break down the door, was shot in the groin and died of his wound soon after. (Quinn is buried in the cemetery on Camp Hill overlooking Harpers Ferry.) Pvt Matthew Ruppert was shot through the cheek, but recovered.

Greene, seeing that the remaining insurrectionists had surrendered, called a halt to the onslaught. The entire action was over in less than three minutes. A corre-

Retired Marine CWO-3 Will Hutchison, portraying Maj William Russell; Larry Bopp, portraying a citizen of Harpers Ferry; and Steven Bockmiller, portraying 1stLt Israel Greene, respectively, discuss an upcoming program.

spondent of the Richmond, Va., *Daily Dispatch*, who was an eyewitness to the assault, would report:

“Immediately the signal for the attack was given, and the Marines ... advanced in two lines on each side of the door. Two powerful fellows sprang between the lines, and with heavy sledgehammers attempted to batter down the door. The door swung and swayed, but appeared to be secured with a rope, the spring of which deadened the effect of the blows. Failing thus to obtain a breach, the Marines were ordered to fall back, and a [dozen] of them took hold of a ladder, some [20 feet] long, and advancing at a run, brought it with tremendous power against the door. At the second blow it gave way, one leaf falling inward in a slanting position.

“The Marines immediately advanced to the breach, Major Russell and Lieutenant Greene leading the way. A Marine in front fell; the firing from the interior is rapid and sharp, they fire with deliberate aim, and for the moment the resistance is serious and desperate enough to excite the spectators to something like pitch frenzy. The next moment the Marines pour in, the firing ceases, and the work was done, whilst the cheers rang from every side, the general feeling being that the Marines





had done their part admirably.”

After freeing the hostages, the Marines removed Brown, who had been wounded in the neck by Greene’s sword blow, and two other raiders from the engine house. They now had to assume the job of safeguarding the men they had just captured from an angry lynch mob. The Marines retained control of the prisoners, holding them in a house across the street from the armory. Four hours after the assault, Pvt Quinn died of his wounds in the room next to where Brown was being interrogated by Lee and Greene.

The Marines escorted Brown and his fellow conspirators to Charles Town, Va., around noon on the 19th and turned them over to civilian authorities for incarceration and trial. That evening Marines were sent to Pleasant Valley, Md., following a rumor of further insurrection. The rumors proved false, and the Marines returned to Washington on 20 Oct. Brown was hanged a few weeks later after being convicted in Virginia for the crime of inciting servile insurrection.

In his official report LTC Lee praised “the conduct of the detachment of Marines, who were at all times ready and prompt in the execution of any duty.” First

Lt Stuart agreed that Greene “did his duty handsomely.” Lee subsequently sent a personal note to Commandant Harris commenting: “Your Corps has captivated so many hearts in Virginia.”

Editor’s note: The photos were provided by GySgt Williams. Some were shot by Beth Hall, and others were provided to the “gunny” by the National Park Service.

GySgt Williams is the director of the nonprofit United States Marine Corps Historical Company, a very active nationwide organization of volunteer historical interpretive specialists who take Marine Corps history from behind glass and put a human face on it.

The National Park Service, working with the United States Marine Corps Historical Company, will conduct special events, lectures, tours, exhibits and much more at the Harpers Ferry (now West Virginia) National Historical Park and in surrounding counties, Oct. 16-18, to mark the 150th anniversary of John Brown’s raid. To learn more about the special events and coordinate your visit, go to the National Park Service Web site at www.nps.gov/hafe.

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